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EVIDENCES
OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION;
Briefly and plainly stated.

BY

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ETY OF MANCHESTER.

VOLUME FIRST.

EDINBURGH:

PRINTED FOR A. STRAHAN AND T. CADELL, LONDON;
AND W. CREECH, EDINBURGH.

M, DCC, LXXXVI. *8*

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THIS little work was originally intended for the use of some young persons, with whom I am connected. During a visit I paid last year to THE BISHOP OF CHESTER (DR PORTEUS) at his delightful parsonage at Hunton in Kent, I showed his Lordship a sketch of the first and second chapter, and gave him a general account of what I meant to introduce in the sequel. He said, that something of this kind was much wanted ;

wanted ; and that a comprehensive view of the principal evidences of CHRISTIANITY, drawn up in such a manner as to fix the attention without fatiguing it, might be highly useful in establishing the religious principles of our youth, at their first entrance into the world. He was pleased to express, in pretty strong terms, his approbation of my whole plan, and of the execution, as far as he had seen it. He favoured me, both at that time, and afterwards in the course of our correspondence, with important hints for the management of some parts of the subject. And he desired me to finish the
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performance as soon as possible,
and send it to the press.

ON the strength of this encouragement chiefly, I have ventured to make it publick. And To His LORDSHIP, AS A SMALL, BUT AFFECTIONATE, MEMORIAL OF THE FRIENDSHIP WITH WHICH HE HAS LONG HONOURED ME, AND TO WHICH I AM INDEBTED FOR SOME OF THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF MY LIFE, I BEG LEAVE TO INSCRIBE IT.

J. BEATTIE.

1785.

THE

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INTRODUCTION.

THAT there is in the world, and that for more than seventeen hundred years there has been, a RELIGION called THE CHRISTIAN, will hardly be controverted: and that it must have derived its origin from some person or persons, who introduced and taught it, seems to be equally certain, or at least will not be denied by those who allow a cause to be necessary to the production of an effect.

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THIS religion, say the Christians, derives its origin from JESUS CHRIST; a person of unequalled wisdom, unexampled goodness, and supernatural power; who taught it to his disciples, commanding them to preach it in all nations. This religion, says the infidel, admitting that Jesus introduced it, derives its origin from imposture and falsehood, and owes its continuance to the enthusiasm, the knavery, and the folly of mankind.

THE tendency of this religion, say its enemies, is to darken and bewilder the understanding, to interrupt the pleasures of life, to confound human affairs, to debase the mind by superstition, and to make men timorous and

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and cruel. The tendency of this religion, say they who are better acquainted with it, is to enlighten the mind with true wisdom ; to banish superstition ; to promote universal righteousness, charity, and peace ; to comfort us in adversity, and give prosperity its highest relish ; to encourage the most transporting hopes, with full assurance that they will not be disappointed ; to repress every malevolent and every evil passion ; to make men, whatever their outward circumstances may be, resigned and thankful ; and, in a word, to promote their happiness, both in time, and through all eternity.

OPINIONS

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OPINIONS so opposite cannot both be true; and they, who have the means of knowing the truth, ought to inquire on which side it lies. If this religion be from heaven, to be indifferent about it is inexcusable, and must be dangerous. And no man is entitled to say, that it is not from heaven, till he have studied its evidence and doctrines, and found the former insufficient to satisfy a fair mind, and the latter unworthy of a divine original. To refuse to believe, or inquire about this religion, because one may have read or heard some things plausibly written or said against it, would be as uncandid, as to refuse all information concerning my character, for example, except that which is known to have
been

been given by my mortal enemy. Between the two cases, however, there is this difference; and a very considerable one it seems to be. To the greater part of mankind it is a matter of no moment to be informed, whether I be honest, or the contrary, a man of sense, or a fool. But if the Christian religion be true, and that it is false has not yet been proved, it must be a matter of infinite concern to us all, that it be accurately studied and well understood.

IN defence of Christianity many excellent books have been written; by Grotius, Clarke, Locke, Lardner, Butler, West, Lyttelton, Sherlock, and others, whose integrity and learning will

INTRODUCTION.

will not be called in question. The design of this little work is, not to supersede as unnecessary, but to recommend, and serve as an introduction to, the perusal of those great authors; by showing as plainly, and as briefly, as I can, to every candid reader, and especially to the young, that the evidence of this religion is at least strong enough to merit attention and deliberate inquiry. If I can accomplish even this purpose, I shall do service to a cause, which, as a friend to mankind, I have always had very much at heart. For, from several conversations which it has been my chance to have with unbelievers, I have learned, that ignorance of the nature of our religion, and a disinclination to study both it
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and its evidence, are to be reckoned among the chief causes of infidelity.

I HAVE sometimes met with little practical treatises called *Ten minutes advice*—to those who are about to engage in such or such an enterprise. Those performances may have their use, though they should not contain a full detail of the business alluded to. I mean to give *Two hours advice*—to that person, who may be in danger from the books, or from the company, of infidels, and is candid enough to desire to be informed, in few words, whether the evidence on the other side be so plausible as to deserve the notice of a rational mind. If I shall satisfy him that it is, he will naturally lay

lay me aside, and have recourse, for further information, to those authors who have gone through the whole subject, and illustrated and proved many things, which the narrowness of my plan permits me only to affirm, or perhaps only to hint at. And, which is far the most important part of the whole procedure, he will at the same time REVERENTLY CONSULT those Sacred Oracles, which contain the history of Divine Revelation; and which he will find, more frequently, perhaps, and more fully, than he could have imagined, to carry their own evidence along with them. And when he has done all this, in the spirit of candour, and with an humble and docile mind, and a sincere desire to know the truth
and

and his duty, I may venture to assure him, that he will not regret the time he has employed in the study, and that from the writings or conversation of unbelievers his faith will never be in danger any more.

THE reader now sees what is aimed at in this little book. If he think my pretensions too high, or my hopes too sanguine, he will allow however, that, as the subject of a free government, I have an undoubted right to publish, whether they be attended to or not, the reasons which have determined me to adhere to that religion wherein I had the happiness to be educated.

CHAP. I.

REVELATION IS USEFUL AND NECESSARY.

THE evidence of the Christian religion is a subject of great extent: all I purpose to do is, to give a summary view of it. I do not mean to produce proof for every one of the assertions I may make concerning matters of fact: for this would require a great deal of time. But knowing, that to the best cause every sort of misrepresentation is injurious, I shall be careful

careful to advance nothing as certain, but what does admit of proof, and has actually been proved by the learned authors, who have distinguished themselves on the side of truth in this controversy.

THIS evidence has been divided into external and internal: the former arising from prophecy, miracles, and historical testimony; the latter, from the peculiar character, and intrinsic excellency of the Christian religion. Some authors have enlarged chiefly on the one sort of evidence, and some on the other; and some have been equally attentive to both. I shall speak, first, of the external evidence, and, secondly, of the internal; though occasion-

casionally perhaps, and in order to avoid prolixity and needless repetition, I may speak of both at the same time.

THE first thing to be inquired into is, the importance and usefulness of Divine Revelation. For, if such a thing be useful and important, and even necessary to man, it must be suitable to the divine wisdom and goodness to bestow it.

1. IF man had persevered in his primitive innocence ; if human principles and practice had no influence on human happiness, or on each other ; and if ignorance, inattention, and prejudice, if superstition and sensuality, if savage life and sanguinary passions, had

no

no tendency to corrupt mens opinions, to pervert their reason, and to plunge them into guilt and wretchedness;—on these suppositions, I should readily admit, that there is no need of revelation. But from daily experience, and from the history of men in all ages it appears, that not one of the things now supposed is agreeable to fact.

That man did not persevere in innocence, requires no proof. That corrupt principles and criminal practice lead to misery, and truth and virtue to happiness, is as evident, as that order is preferable to confusion, security to danger, and a wise and good man to a barbarian or wild beast. That, even though our intentions be
good,

good, we must mistake our duty, if we are ignorant of the nature of that being who is the object of it, will not be doubted by those who have observed, that we must believe a man to be our parent or benefactor, before we can be sensible that we owe him the duty of gratitude or filial affection. And that mens notions of all the objects of duty, of their Creator, their fellow men, and themselves, are liable to be perverted, and in every country unenlightened by revelation have been perverted, by the weakness of the human understanding, by the force of prejudice and passion, by vice, by inattention, by superstition, and by ignorance, the history of mankind proves
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to be a melancholy, but incontestable truth.

THIS being granted, it will follow, that a revelation, which rectifies and ascertains mens notions of the several objects of duty, by explaining the nature of God and of man, and by informing their conscience with respect to particular duties, must be highly important and beneficial; and must even be necessary to the attainment of that degree of happiness and virtue, whereof human nature appears to be susceptible, and for which, therefore, we may presume that man was made.

2. THE character of the Supreme Being, and the nature and destination of
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of man, must be very imperfectly known to those who have received no positive information concerning the reality of a future state, and its connection with the present. Now this is a point on which all the evidences collected by human reason, while unaided by divine light, amount to nothing higher than probable conjecture. But that better evidence, in so interesting a matter, must be a desirable thing, will be acknowledged by all men:—unless there be men who believe that a future state is an absolute impossibility. Revelation, therefore, seems to be necessary, to give such evidence of another life, and such intelligence concerning it, as may vindicate the divine goodness and wisdom

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with respect to the constitution of the present ; and such as may also prove a comfort to good men, and a restraint on the passions of the wicked ; and such, moreover, as may serve for a solemn intimation to all men, that their behaviour in this state of trial is to them a matter of infinite importance. That this last consideration strengthens morality, or promotes at least the peace of society, and, consequently, the happiness of mankind, seems to be admitted by the enemies, as well as by the friends of religion. Else how can we account for that favourite notion of the infidel, that religion was contrived, and is patronised, by politicians, in order to overawe the world, and
make

make the passions of men more manageable?

3. REVELATION is further necessary, to explain on what terms we may hope for pardon, consistently with the perfection of divine justice. Of the necessity of expiation for guilt, all mankind seem to have had an idea; as appears from the universal use of sacrifices. But, from the multitude of the pagan expiatory rites; from the absurdity of all, and the impiety of many of them; and especially from the circumstance of their consulting oracles on the subject of atonement; we may warrantably infer, not only their ignorance of duty in this particular, but also their consciousness of that ignorance.

rance. And some of their best philosophers of the Socratic school seemed to think, that, till God should be pleased to reveal his will in an extraordinary manner, it would be impossible for man to know what religious service would be most acceptable to him. To those, who were so wise, and so candid, as to think and speak in this manner, may we not presume, that the Christian doctrine of repentance and faith, if they had rightly understood it, and if they had known its evidence, would have been a most welcome discovery?

To our infidels, indeed, it is not welcome; for they say they have no need of it: being, it seems, fully satisfied,

tisfied, that, however ignorant Socrates might confess himself to be, they have all the knowledge that man has occasion for. And yet, if it had not been for this manifestation of divine grace and truth, they would, probably, at this day, have been consulting oracles, offering incense to idols, or perhaps, like many of our remote forefathers, polluting the creation with human sacrifices. Certain it is, that in these things no material reformation was ever introduced, or attempted, by the philosophers of old. That men should worship the gods, and perform the sacrifices, and other rites, as by law established, was the doctrine not of Pythagoras and Epictetus only, but of Cicero, a wiser, or more learned
man

man at least, than either, and even of Socrates himself, the wisest of them all. So that, if philosophy had been man's only guide, it is probable, nay it is more than probable, that idolatry would at this day have been his religion.

4. REVELATION is yet further necessary, in order to make the whole of human duty not only *known*, but *obvious to all capacities*. The best heathen moralists acknowledged their ignorance in some points of duty; and what they knew they had not power to enforce upon the common people, who, in ancient times, were very illiterate, having rarely access to books, whereof there were then but few in
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the world. Though they had possessed such power, and been all of the same mind, which was by no means the case; and though they had not been prompted, as most of them were, by pride, vanity, or the spirit of contradiction, to introduce new systems, yet their labours could have but little effect. Such arguments as they had to offer the greater part of mankind could not understand. For, in fact, the common people, in general, are not capable of perceiving the force of arguments, especially when the reasoning is complex, and relates to matters so remote from sense as the truths of morality and religion. Of this some ancient lawgivers, as Minos of Crete, and Numa of Rome, were so sensible,

sensible, that they thought it prudent to ascribe to their institutions a divine original, pretending that they received them from the gods.

I do not mean to say, that the doctrines of the philosophers, particularly of Socrates, and the better sort of Stoicks, did no good. What Socrates taught, or rather conjectured, concerning the immortality of the soul; and what both he and the Stoicks delivered, though not always clearly or consistently, with respect to the divine existence, providence, omnipresence, and omnipotence, was, no doubt, of use in dissipating some of those clouds of superstition and error which then overshadowed the nations. But, as a
system

system of natural religion and moral duty, all ancient philosophy was very incomplete, as Socrates well knew; nor was it accompanied with evidence or authority sufficient to raise the attention, or convince the understanding of any, except perhaps of a few speculative men: and even they were inclined, as Lactantius, Cicero, and Aristotle * testify, to make it a subject of declamation and dispute, and a mere *tongue-exercise*, rather than a rule of life. Indeed, if we believe Laertius, who, though neither an elegant nor a judicious writer, yet deserves praise as a collector of anecdotes; nay, if we

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* Lactantius, iii. 15. 16. Cicero, Tusc. quæst. ii. 4. Arist. Ethic. ii. 3.

believe Cicero, to whose judgment more respect is due; we must also believe, that the greater part of those, whom antiquity honoured with the name of philosophers, were men of loose principles and bad morals. Many of them disgraced human reason by their profligate tenets and sophistical wrangling; and some of them, by their impudence, buffoonery, and beastliness, were a disgrace to human nature.

BUT, even from the best of them, what was to be expected in behalf of the common people, that is, of mankind? Socrates was the most popular, and, in all respects, the least exceptionable teacher of heathen morality.

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He taught, that is, conversed in public as well as in private; and all who chose it were permitted to attend him. But he never set himself up as a general reformer, nor did he pretend to more wisdom than other men. And, as the charms of his conversation drew the chief men of Athens around him, we may presume, that the common people, probably not very curious to know what he said, would keep at a distance. Besides, his peculiar way of reasoning, by question and answer, though as fair and satisfactory as can be, is better suited to the purpose of instructing a small circle of friends conversing familiarly and at leisure, than of conveying knowledge to the common people.

ABOUT

ABOUT the common people the Stoicks gave themselves no trouble, but seem to have considered them as little better than beasts. Some of their paradoxes would appear, from their extreme absurdity, to have been contrived on purpose to exclude the herd of mankind from the sublime mysteries of that philosophy. And many of their tenets they wrapt up in strange language, (for they were very licentious in the use of words); and they so perplexed the human intellect by frivolous disputation, that their teaching could not be generally useful; nay, even to those men of learning who had made it their study, it must have been in many particulars unintelligible. Cicero, indeed, in his
book

book of moral duties, explained the practical part of their moral philosophy, in a clear and elegant style; and, by so doing, enriched his native tongue with the best system of Pagan morality extant. Yet still it is an imperfect system; and for a great part of it he was indebted, not to the Stoicks, whom, though he followed, he did not follow as a translator, but to Plato, Aristotle, and his own good sense.

THOUGH the Stoicks had been better qualified than they were for the office of public teachers, the people would not have greatly profited by what they taught. That external things are neither good nor evil; and that to be stretched on a rack, or
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to repose on a bed of roses, are, to a wise man, matters of equal and absolute indifference; is a tenet which the generality of mankind could hardly believe, and which, if they did believe it, was more likely to do them harm than good. For from this principle it would require no profound skill in logick (and the Stoicks were deep logicians) to infer, that, by robbing a wise man of his money, cutting off his leg or arm, stealing his child, or murdering his friend, they only took that from him on which he set no value. That men ought to be resigned to the divine will, but that, when any thing vexed them, they had an undoubted right to make away with them.

themselves, after the example of Zeno, who in a pet hanged himself, because he had hurt his finger *; would, to a man of plain sense, appear neither very consistent doctrine, nor very beneficial. That the Deity is superior to fate, and that fate is superior to the Deity, is not more consistent; and that the world is God, or at least his body or substance, is an aphorism that throws no great light on the first principles of theology. That the soul is immortal, is affirmed by Seneca; who also affirms that death is nothing, and reduces every thing to nothing, and that the tranquillity of the dead is the same with that of those who are not born.

* Diogenes Laertius.

born*. That at death we return to the elements whence we came, and lose all personal existence; that there is no future punishment or reward, and that it is no matter whether there be any or not; are doctrines of the same school, alike unfriendly to happiness and to virtue. That pity is unworthy of a wise man, is a strange lesson to inculcate on beings so frail as we are, who stand so much in need of the compassion and kindness of one another: yet this was taught by the followers of Zeno. And that human souls are part of the divine essence, and that a man may become equal, and in some respects superior, to the Deity:

* De Consolat. ad Marc. cap. 19.

ty:—Is this audacious and impious tenet likely to have any other effect than to cherish pride and presumption so extravagant, as to harden the heart against every amiable affection, and make the understanding equally impatient to hear, and incapable to receive, the dictates of true wisdom?

IN fact, notwithstanding the morals of some of them, which I am not anxious to find fault with, and the beauty of many of their sentiments, which I readily acknowledge, I am in doubt, whether, as teachers of the common people, they would not have been as blind guides, as even the Epicureans themselves. The doctrines of the latter were downright atheism : and those

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of the former plainly lead to it; as indeed every form of false philosophy must do, that teaches men to think and speak irreverently of the Supreme Being, and to deny a future state of retribution. Of the Stoicks, therefore, Milton, who knew them well, spoke neither rashly nor too severely, when he said;

Alas! what can they teach, and not mislead,
Ignorant of themselves, of God much more?
Much of the soul they talk, but all awry;
And in themselves seek virtue, and to themselves
All glory arrogate, to God give none.

PARADISE REGAINED.

BUT,

BUT, when the fulness of the time was come, THE TEACHER OF THE POOR did at last appear: not, like the Stoick, proud hardhearted and disputatious; but, like the Son of God, meek and unaffected, compassionate and lowly, divinely benevolent and divinely wise. ‘Go,’ said he, to two of John’s disciples, who had come to ask whether he was the Messiah, ‘Go your way, and tell John
‘ what things ye have seen and heard;
‘ how that the blind see, the lame walk,
‘ the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,
‘ the dead are raised, *and* good tidings
‘ are preached to the poor.’ All this had been foretold by the prophet Isaiah; and in Jesus the prophecy was fulfilled. And his doctrine was distinguished

tinguished from that of all other teachers, not only by its intrinsic excellence, and by those mighty works that bore testimony to its truth, but also by its being in so peculiar a manner addressed to the poor, and suited to their capacity, and consequently to that of all the rest of mankind. His birth was announced, not to the great ones of the earth, but to shepherds. On poverty of spirit, or lowliness of mind, which is indeed the foundation of the Christian character, he pronounced a particular benediction: his servants he chose from among the poor: and, by the establishment of a church, he provided a perpetual succession of ministers, who should preach the gospel to the poor, and to all other ranks of men,

men, to the end of the world. In consequence of this most gracious dispensation, the meanest of the Christian people, if it is not their own fault, may, in all ordinary cases, learn juster notions of virtue and vice, of God and man, of providence and a future state, than the most learned philosopher could ever attain in the days of paganism. Can these facts be denied? And in him who admits them is it possible that any doubt should remain, concerning the usefulness of divine revelation, or the infinite importance of that which is brought to light by the gospel?

LET not then the infidel pretend, that human reason is alone sufficient

cient to discover the whole of man's duty, and establish in the world a complete or comfortable system of natural religion. For it is certain, that, even in the most polite nations, unassisted reason never did this, and, in the opinion of Socrates, never could. And of barbarous nations it will not be said, that their reason ever made important discoveries of any kind. And it deserves particular notice, that what our infidels call natural religion is in a great measure, as Rousseau himself acknowledges, derived from that very scripture, which they absurdly and wickedly reject. I do not mean, that their ideas on this subject are acquired by an actual perusal of holy writ. In this study it is to be feared that few or
none

none of them ever made great proficiency. Those ideas they derive from impressions made on their minds in infancy and early youth; when, together with the humility and candour, it is probable they also had, what every Christian must have, the teachableness, of little children. The writings too, and the conversation of Christians, to which, in these parts of the world, they must sometimes attend, may convey to them principles, which they admit as rational, though perhaps they might be inclined to overlook, if they knew them to be scriptural.

IF revelation be so highly important, it is most suitable to the wisdom

dom and mercy of God to bestow it; and some persons even of the heathen, particularly Socrates, were not without hope, that one time or other it would be bestowed. So far was that great man from asserting the sufficiency of his knowledge, with respect either to divine or to human things, that, though by no means a sceptick, he used, through excess of modesty, to say, that he knew nothing but his own ignorance. He taught, that the gods grant extraordinary communications of wisdom to those to whom they are propitious: and recommended it to his friends to have recourse to oracles, and other religious rites, in order to obtain from heaven such necessary or useful information as human reason

reason was not of itself able to supply*. Indeed the oracles, divinations, and auguries, so much attended to by the pagan world, prove, as already hinted, their consciousness of their own ignorance, and of the need that mankind have of supernatural illumination.

Of their oracles we know little, and can affirm nothing but what partakes more or less of conjecture. That they were the contrivance of priest-craft, has been said, and may in part be true. It has also been said, that demons had a concern in them; and this no considerate person will affirm to be impossible. Perhaps they may have

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* Xenoph. Memorab. lib. 1.

been permitted by Providence to keep up in the minds of men a sense of the insufficiency of human reason, and to make them think, as Socrates did, that divine revelation was, at least, a desirable thing. This is certain, that Socrates had faith in them; that, tho' some of their answers might easily be accounted for, others are rather extraordinary; that Providence did, for a time, permit them; and that, soon after the great revelation took place, they became universally silent. These facts deserve the attention of those who reject the gospel.

BUT, however desirable revelation may be, and however beneficial, we must not have the presumption to think that

that the Deity is *obliged* to bestow it. For this we have no better reason than to suppose that he was obliged to create man at first; or that he is under any necessary determination, arising from the perfection of his nature, to make men archangels, or to make all men equal in rank or sagacity. His dispensations of benevolence and grace are all gratuitous. We have nothing but what we have received from him, and what he might have withheld, without any imputation on his goodness, or any diminution of his eternal and unalterable felicity.

NOR is it possible for us to judge how far it may be consistent with the views of his providence, to make this
revela-

revelation universal. Its good effects may be so, though it is not universally known: for it teaches, that persons who lived long before our Lord appeared on earth, and who never heard of his name, may be saved by his merits.

THIS being admitted, no conclusion unfavourable to Christianity can be drawn from the circumstance of its being known in some parts only of the world, and not known till four thousand years after the creation. For if it had been known one thousand, or three thousand years sooner, a captious mind might still ask, why it was not earlier, and coeval with mankind, or at least with the fall. Whatever con-

cerns

cerns man must have a beginning; and that Being who governs the universe, who alone perfectly knows his own counsels, and who sees at once the past the present and the future, can alone determine *when* any particular dispensation of Providence ought to begin; how quick or how slow it ought to be in its progress; and when it is to be completed. Many discoveries, beneficial to mankind, have been made in modern times. How absurd would it be to suppose the recency of a discovery an argument against its usefulness; or against the goodness of God in giving man the power of making it now, rather than at an earlier period! Every thing here is progressive. If at once, and in the beginning,
man

46 REVELATION IS USEFUL, &c.

man had received all the good things that a gracious Creator had destined for him, this life could not have been a state of probation; and we, having no desires ungratified, no faculties unimproved, and nothing further to hope or to fear, must have been equally incapable of activity and of happiness.

CHAP.

CHAP. II.

THE GOSPEL HISTORY IS TRUE.

THE gospel history being conveyed to us in writing, the only possible way in which it could be safely conveyed through the long succession of seventeen hundred years, its evidences must, in part, depend on human testimony. In some respects, however, they are peculiar, and differ from those of other histories. No circumstance of the life of Julius Cesar;
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the battle of Pharsalia, for example, the destruction of the Nervii, or the invasion of Britain; is alluded to, so far as I know, in any writing previous to the birth of that commander: but many of the facts recorded in the gospel, though seemingly of far less magnitude, bear a striking resemblance to events foretold by Jewish prophets, who lived several hundred years before the birth of Christ. The particulars of Cesar's life, the speeches he made, and the great transactions he was engaged in, made no material alteration, except perhaps to the worse, in the manners or sentiments of mankind. But the things that were done, and the doctrines that were taught, by the supposed son of a carpenter of Judea,

dea, and by some fishermen his friends, produced a most important change, to the better, in human sentiments and manners; a change diffused through many nations, and of which we at this day see and feel the consequences.

THE evidences of the gospel, therefore, are to be treated somewhat differently from those of other historical records. I shall first consider it, merely as a portion of antient history. Secondly, I shall speak of it as the accomplishment of certain prophecies. And I shall afterwards inquire, whether it may not be further confirmed, by the peculiar excellency of the knowledge we derive from it, as well as by the extraordinary changes introduced

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by

by it into the system of human affairs.

SECTION I.

The Gospel considered as a portion of ancient history.

AS a short preface to what I have to say on the evidence of the gospel, considered as a portion of ancient history, it may be proper to set down the following remarks on testimony.

It

It is natural for man to speak as he thinks; and it is easy too, like walking forward. One may walk backwards or sideways; but it is uneasy, and a sort of force upon nature: and the same thing is true of speaking or declaring what is contrary to one's belief. At least this is the general rule. Long practice in falsehood, or in walking sideways or backward, may no doubt render it easy; but it requires long practice to make it so.

WE naturally believe what others tell us. We trust the word of a man of whose honesty we have had experience; but we also credit testimony previous to experience: for children who have least experience are most credulous.

credulous. It is from having experienced the dishonesty of men, and the motives that tempt them to falsify, that we come to distrust or disbelieve what they say.

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IN general, when we doubt a man's word, we have always one or other of these four reasons for it: we think, that what he says is incredible or improbable; or that there is some temptation or motive which inclines him in the present case to violate truth; or that he is not a competent judge of the matter wherein he gives testimony; or perhaps we doubt his veracity now, because we have known him to be a deceiver formerly. If we have no reason to distrust his integrity; if we think him

him a competent judge of that which he affirms; if we know of no motive of vanity or interest that might incline him to falsify; and if he affirm nothing but what is credible and probable; we shall without scruple acquiesce in his declaration.

OUR faith in testimony often rises to absolute certainty. That there are such towns as Constantinople and Smyrna, and such countries as Asia, Africa, and America; that Cesar and Annibal were real men and great commanders, the one a Roman, the other a Carthaginian; that William of Normandy conquered England; that Charles I. was beheaded, &c.—every person, who knows any thing of history,

ry, accounts himself absolutely certain. For the testimonies that confirm these and the like truths are so many, so various, and so consistent, that we justly think it *impossible* they should be fictitious.

WHEN a number of persons, not acting in concert, having no interest to conceal what is true or affirm what is false, and competent judges of what they testify, concur in making the same report, it would be thought madness to disbelieve them. Even when three, or when two witnesses, separately examined, and who have had no opportunity to contrive a plan before hand, agree in their declaration, we believe them, though we have had no experience

ience of their veracity; because we know, that in such a case their testimonies would not be uniform, if they were not true.—In this way, men have judged in all ages; and upon this principle the most important questions relating to life and property are decided: and of such decisions and judgments the general experience of mankind proves the utility and the rectitude.

AN impossible fact no testimony whatever, not even that of our own senses, would make us believe. If I were to see the same individual man double, or in two places at the same time, I should certainly think, not that it was so, but that something was wrong

wrong in my sight, or that the appearance might be owing to some peculiarity in the medium through which I saw it. When a fact is possible, and still more when it is not improbable, the testimony of a stranger would incline us to believe, unless we had reason to suspect him of a design to impose upon us.

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MIRACULOUS facts are not to be ranked with impossibilities. There was a time, when the matter that composes my body was as void of life, as it will be when it shall have lain twenty years in the grave; when the elementary particles, whereof my eye is made up, could no more enable a percipient being to see, than they can now enable one

one to speak; and when that which forms the substance of this hand was as inert as a stone. Yet now, by the goodness of the Creator, the first lives, the last moves, and by means of the second I perceive light and colours. And if Almighty power can bring about all this gradually, by one particular succession of causes and effects, may not the same power perform it in an instant, and by the operation of other causes to us unknown? Or will the atheist say (and none who believes in God can doubt the possibility of miracles) that he himself knows every possible cause that can operate in the production of any effect? Or is he certain that there is no such thing in the universe as Almighty power?

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To raise a dead man to life; to cure blindness with a touch; to remove lameness, or any other bodily imperfection, by speaking a word, are all miracles; but must all be as easy to the author of nature, or to any person commissioned by him for that purpose, as to give life to an embryo, make the eye an organ of sight, or cause vegetables to revive in the spring. And therefore, if a person, declaring himself to be sent of God, or invested with divine power, and saying and doing what is worthy of such a commission, should perform miracles like these, mankind would have the best reason to believe, that his authority was really from heaven.

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As the common people have neither time nor capacity for deep reasoning; and as a divine revelation of religion must be intended for all sorts of men, the vulgar as well as the learned, the poor as well as the rich; it is necessary, that the evidence of such a revelation should be of that kind which may command general attention, and convince men of all ranks and characters, and should therefore be level to every capacity. It would be easy, no doubt, for the Deity to convey his truths immediately to every man by inspiration, so as to make inquiry unnecessary, and doubt impossible. But this would not be consistent with man's free agency and moral probation; and this would be very unlike every other dispensation

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dispensation of Providence with respect to man, who, as he is endowed with rational faculties, feels that he is under an obligation to use and improve them. This would be to make him love religion, and believe in it, without leaving it in his power to do otherwise: and such faith, and such love, would be no mark of either a good disposition or a bad.—Now there is no kind of evidence, consistent with our moral probation and free agency, that is likely to command universal attention, and carry full conviction in religious matters to men of all ranks and capacities, except the evidence arising from miracles, or supernatural events.

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ONE author has indeed affirmed, that miracles can be no evidence of any doctrine; because no testimony whatever can, in his opinion, render a miracle credible even in the lowest degree. But I need not quit the tract of my argument, for the sake of a paradox, so contrary to the natural dictates of rationality, and which has been unanswerably confuted by Dr Campbell in his *Dissertation on Miracles*. In fact, every event admits of proof from human testimony, which it is possible for a sufficient number of competent witnesses to see and to hear.

SOME things may seem to be supernatural, which are really not so: such are the tricks of the juggler; whereof

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when we are told the contrivance, we are surpris'd to find it so easy, and almost ashamed of having ever wonder'd at it. Some other things appear supernatural to those only who are ignorant of their causes: and such are many facts in electricity, magnetism, and other parts of experimental philosophy.

BUT the mighty works of our Saviour are quite of a different kind. To raise the dead to life, to cure the most violent disease by speaking a word, to walk on the surface of a stormy sea:—these, and many other things recorded in the gospel, are truly miraculous; and such as, to human apprehension, that power only can perform, which,

which, having established the course of nature, is alone able to change it.

Of this sort of miracles the author of our religion not only wrought many, but also imparted to his apostles the power of doing the same. And, what was still more wonderful, if any thing could be more so, he himself, after having been crucified, in the presence of a great multitude, and pierced with a lance, and found to be dead, and after lying part of three days in the grave, arose to life, re-animated that body which had been mangled on the cross, passed forty days on earth after his resurrection, during which time he frequently conversed with his disciples, and at last, in open day, and while he
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was speaking to them, visibly ascended from the earth, till a cloud received him out of their sight. These miracles transcend all power but what is divine. So that, if we admit the gospel history to be true, we must believe, beyond a possibility of doubt, that our Lord was, what he declared himself to be, a person invested with divine power, and employed in a divine mission. The truth of the history may be proved from many considerations.

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has undergone, may be easily accounted for: on the contrary supposition, nothing in the whole compass of human affairs is more unaccountable, than the rise and progress of Christianity. Its history may be traced from the present age up to that of the apostles. Since that period, down to these times, so many writers speak of this gospel, and concur in so many particulars concerning it, that there is not perhaps any other antient record, for whose authenticity so many vouchers could be produced. And we know for certain, that many intelligent persons of the primitive church, who had the best opportunities of knowing the truth of this matter, and whose supreme concern it was to inquire into it, and not

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suffer themselves to be mistaken, believed and asserted the truth of the gospel, and suffered death in confirmation of their faith and testimony. Can any thing like this be urged in favour of Xenophon, Sallust, or Tacitus; whose authority, notwithstanding, the world is not much inclined, and in general has no great reason, to call in question?

6 HAD the evangelists written the history, and the apostles preached the doctrines, of a man who lived before they were born, or whom neither they nor their contemporaries had ever seen, their testimony would not perhaps have been above suspicion.. But I shall not misrepresent the circumstances, or the conduct,

conduct, of those extraordinary teachers, if I suppose them to have addressed their countrymen the Jews, who were the first hearers of the gospel, in words like these: ‘We tell you of this
‘man, our divine master, many things
‘which ye yourselves know to be true;
‘and nothing, in regard to which ye
‘may not, if ye candidly inquire, satisfy yourselves by the testimony of
‘credible witnesses, who heard and
‘saw what we affirm. From persisting
‘in falsehood we have nothing to hope;
‘and ye in detecting it can have nothing
‘to fear. The power of the state is in
‘your hands: exert yourselves to the
‘utmost; and confute us if ye can.’
Suppose an address of this kind to be made to the French nation, concerning

a history of certain well known events that had happened in France; and suppose the only answer returned by public authority to be as follows: 'On the subject ye mention we command you and your adherents to be silent on pain of death:'—of which party, let me ask, would the world judge most favourably? Would it not be said, that nothing could be more fair, than what is declared on the one side; and that on the other there at once appeared invincible prejudice and implacable malignity?

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BUT what motives could those Jews have to wish the gospel might be false, and to shut their eyes against the light with so much obstinacy and perseverance?

ance? Motives they had of the most cogent nature ; motives, which among any people it might be difficult to prevail against, but which from the inherent perverseness of the Jewish nation could hardly fail to derive insurmountable strength.

FOR first, if the Jewish rulers, after the death of our Lord, had acknowledged him to be the Messiah, they must also have acknowledged themselves the perpetrators of the most dreadful crime that ever disgraced a nation ; and from rulers so haughty a confession so humiliating could hardly be looked for. Nor, secondly, was it to be expected, that they could bear to think of the abrogation of the law
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of Moses, which had subsisted so long; which did so much honour to their nation, temple, and capital city; which taught them to consider themselves as God's peculiar people; and from which their priests, scribes, and elders, who we find were the most inveterate enemies of the new religion, derived so many dignities and emoluments.

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THEY might also, thirdly, from many political considerations, be unwilling to receive the gospel, and inclined to look on the men who taught it as the enemies of their country. For if the Messiah was now come, then all their flattering hopes of a glorious conqueror, who should rescue them from the Roman yoke, and exalt them above all nations,

nations, were at an end for ever. And then they might be apprehensive, that the Romans, some of whom, as we learn from Tacitus and Suetonius, knew that a triumphant deliverer from Judea was about this time expected, would be emboldened, on hearing that Rome had now nothing to fear from that quarter, to oppress them more rigorously, and even 'to take away' (as they themselves emphatically expressed it) 'their place and nation *.' Whether the Romans were in any degree intimidated by what they had heard of the Jewish prophecies concerning Messiah, is not known: but that they might be so, and had reason to be so, it

* See John xi. 48.

it was natural enough for a Jew to suppose; especially if he knew, as he probably would know, that on the subject of prophecy the Romans were not a little superstitious. How much Herod dreaded the coming of the Messiah, appears from his murder of the innocents: an event, which must have been well known at Rome; if it be true, as Macrobius relates, that Augustus, on hearing of it, and that one of Herod's sons had suffered in the massacre, facetiously observed, that it was better to be the swine than the son * of Herod. Some however suppose, on the authority of Josephus, that Herod had not then a son under two years of age; and

* *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Ἡρώδου.*

and that the emperor's sarcasm was more probably occasioned by Herod's cruelty in putting to death Aristobulus and Alexander his two sons by Mariamne, and his son Antipater for an alledged conspiracy against his father's life. But this is of little importance in the present argument.

IN a word ; if it be in the power of prejudice, of pride, of ambition, of religious zeal, or of national partiality, to make men averse to the reception of any system of opinions, we need not wonder at the obstinacy of the Jewish rulers. Their passions, generally violent, were all in arms, and in the highest degree exasperated, against Christ and his religion. That so many of

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that nation should have been his disciples, is therefore more wonderful, than that so many should have opposed him. In modern times it cannot apparently be the interest of any, hardened sinners excepted, that the gospel should not be true. Yet even in these days, and in the most enlightened nations, a spirit of opposition to the gospel, and a want of candour with regard to its doctrines and evidence, are by no means uncommon.

If such was the temper of the Jewish rulers; and if we may warrantably suspect them to have been as capable of falsehood, as they certainly were of injustice and cruelty; is it not strange, that the events recorded in the gospel were

were not denied by any contemporary authority? Yet this is the fact: for such authorities, if they had ever appeared, must have been preserved, and argued from by the enemies of the gospel, and replied to in the writings of Christians. And how is this fact to be accounted for? In no other way, I presume, than by supposing, that in Judea the particulars of our Saviour's life were so well known, that no contradictory record would have obtained credit. And to publish such a thing, without being able to make the nation believe it, would have been an injury to their own cause. Their best policy therefore was, to keep up the passions and prejudices of the people, to encourage a spirit of persecution, to confine themselves

themselves to violent and general assertions, and to avoid and discountenance minute inquiry. The truth is, that the antient unbelievers never denied the miracles of Jesus; they imputed them to magick or the power of the devil: a doctrine, which our Lord himself condescended to refute; and of which the modern infidel, as no body now believes in magick, will not seek to avail himself.

BUT prejudice and passion subside at last, and leave the mind at leisure for calm investigation. If then the particulars of our Saviour's life had been as well known as is here supposed, must not the Jews, when the present ferment was over, have come

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to their senses, and acknowledged the truth? That many of them did so, is certain. But from other histories, as well as that of the Jews, we learn, that when the passions of men are thoroughly inflamed, by matters of great and general concern, it may require the operation of years to cool them. And let it be observed, that the Jews had not now much time left for reflection and leisure. The generation that put our Lord to death had not passed away, when the troubles of Judea began; and in less than forty years after the crucifixion, Jerusalem was levelled with the ground, the greater part of the nation exterminated, and the rest scattered abroad throughout the Roman empire.

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BUT, if their rulers were as much exasperated against the new religion, as has been supposed, why, it may be asked, did they not destroy it at once, by putting all the apostles to death? Stephen indeed they stoned in a transport of fury, and Herod murdered James the brother of John: but Peter, and Paul, and others, were permitted to live; and in a little time we find there was a church in Jerusalem, and another in Antioch. How is this to be reconciled with what is said above of the extreme obstinacy and violence of the Jewish rulers?

It may be answered, that these things were so ordered by an overruling Providence, who, having determined that the religion of Christ should
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not be destroyed, miraculously interposed for a time in the preservation of his ministers. If this answer be deemed insufficient, the following considerations are submitted to the reader.

FIRST ; the Jews could have no reason to hope, that, by putting to death all the apostles, or all the Christians, that came in their way, they should annihilate Christianity : there might be others whom they had never heard of ; for our Saviour, during his abode on earth, had many disciples ; five hundred are mentioned by St Paul as witnesses of his resurrection ; and on the day of Pentecost three thousand were converted, and five thousand a few days after.—Secondly ; Peter and Paul,

Paul, though for a time permitted to live, did not live in peace, but underwent cruel persecution ; and the former, if he had not by miracle escaped, would have been murdered by Herod, as James was.—Thirdly ; Several of the apostles, soon after the descent of the Holy Ghost, left Jerusalem, and went to preach elsewhere.—Fourthly ; It may be presumed that the Christians of that age were quiet and inoffensive ; we know indeed for certain that they were so : and the rulers might be afraid to declare open war against them, as not knowing how numerous they might be ; and dreading also, if they should drive matters to extremity, the effects of that influence, which the apostles from time to time acquired among

among the common people. The most oppressive tyrants, even when armed with absolute authority, are not without fears of this kind: how much more timorous must a tyrannical aristocracy have been, that was destitute of mutual confidence, and over-awed by the Roman power!

To which I may add, fifthly, That the advice given by Gamaliel in the council, ‘Refrain from these men, and let them alone; (for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it;) lest haply ye be found even to fight against God:’ I say, this advice had great weight with them; which indeed

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it deserved to have, as a better could not have been given. The event has proved, that Gamaliel was a wise, as well as a pious man: and what was thus so seasonably spoken to the first enemies of the gospel, may with equal propriety be addressed to them who oppose it in these latter days.

IN antient writings, as there is nothing to invalidate the gospel history, so there are several testimonies to confirm it. That Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was the founder of the sect of Christians, is attested by Tacitus, and admitted, I think, by all writers on the subject. Facts recorded in the New Testament, concerning Herod, Pilate, Festus, and Felix, are mentioned

Geoff. Kirkby last in common

mentioned by Josephus, and in the Jewish Talmud. And the new star that shone on the nativity, the earthquake and preternatural darkness that accompanied the crucifixion, and the massacre of the innocents by Herod, are with some reason supposed to have been mentioned by pagan authors, as well as by the evangelists *. This, however, is not affirmed as certain; nor does any material part of the evidence depend upon it.

It is true, that the Roman writers of that time, both historians and philosophers, seem to have been very ignorant of our Saviour's history and doctrine,

* See Grotius de ver. rel. Christ. lib. III. 14. and Macrob. Sat. lib. II. 4.

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doctrine, and to have had no curiosity to know either. Is this wonderful? It will not appear so, to him who considers, the distance of Judea from Rome, and the state of navigation in those days ; the contemptuous opinion which the Romans, the masters of the world, entertained, both of the national character, and of the religion of the Jews ; the proud spirit of the heathen philosophy, so directly repugnant to that humble and docile disposition, which is required of every disciple of Christ ; the extreme dissimilitude between a practical religion, whose sole aim is to purify the soul and prepare it for heaven, and a philosophy framed chiefly for the purpose of dispute and rhetorical declamation ; the mean condition,

dition, and unassuming manners, of the publishers of the gospel, so unlike the pomp and pedantry of the Epicureans and the Stoicks : and above all, perhaps, that crucifixion, which the author of Christianity was known to have undergone, and which his followers avowed and gloried in ; but which, according to the modes of thinking that then universally prevailed through all the rest of the Roman empire as well as in Judea, was a death of so much ignominy, that no person was thought likely to suffer it, who had, or deserved to have, any reputation in the world. He who considers these things ; and who knows the state of learning at that time, the characters of those who were reputed learned, and the real nature

nature of the Christian religion, may indeed wonder to hear that so many were converted to the faith; but will not wonder to find, that neither Seneca nor Epictetus, the elder nor the younger Pliny, Tacitus nor Marcus Aurelius were among the number. See this matter illustrated, with great precision and elegance, in the fourth chapter of Disquisitions (by Sir David Dalrymple) concerning the antiquities of the Christian church *.

SOME of the first Christians, whose writings are still extant, speak of the gospels as the work of those evangelists whose names they bear. And they had good opportunities of information in

* See also Bishop Porteus's Sermons, Ser. X.

by their acknowledged authors

in this particular, as well as of comparing the gospel history with the most authentick traditions concerning the persons and events therein recorded: Origen, who was born in the second century, being contemporary with Irenæus, who was the disciple of Polycarp, who had been the disciple of the apostle John, and personally acquainted with others of the early Christians. Is it to be imagined, that those men would not be inquisitive about the truth of a religion, for which they had ground to believe, that they were likely to suffer persecution and martyrdom? If we suppose ourselves in their situation, with the same alarming view before us, and with the same means of knowledge, they had, we shall see that it is
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not possible for a man of common understanding to do, and to suffer, what they did and suffered, unless he firmly believe the doctrine he maintains, and know that he has good reason to believe it.

To all this we may add, that the Epistles, which are of the same age with the historical part of the New Testament, appear evidently to have been written by men who were in earnest in what they wrote, and to be adapted to real occurrences and circumstances of the times.

THE style, too, of the gospel bears intrinsic evidence of its truth. We find there no appearance of artifice or
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of party-spirit ; no attempts to exaggerate on the one hand, or depreciate on the other ; no remarks thrown in to anticipate objections ; nothing of that caution, which never fails to distinguish the testimony of those who are conscious of imposture ; no endeavour to reconcile the reader's mind to what may be extraordinary in the narrative : all is fair, candid, and simple : the historians make no reflections of their own, but confine themselves to matter of fact, that is, to what they heard and saw ; and honestly record their own mistakes and faults, as well as the other particulars of the story.

FOR a more full display of some of these arguments, as well as for other

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things that might be mentioned on this head, the reader, till he have leisure to peruse more voluminous writings, may consult Addison's short but elegant Treatise of the Christian religion. Whence it will appear, that the gospel history is at least as well vouch'd as any other of that time; and that we have as good reason to believe what the New Testament records of the birth, life, miracles, death and doctrine of Christ, as to believe the battle of Cannæ, the assassination of Julius Cesar, or any other antient fact. Nay we have still extant among us two visible proofs, not hitherto mentioned, of the truth of the gospel, I mean the two Sacraments; which are known to have been in the Christian church from the beginning,

beginning, and the origin of which it would not be easy to account for, on the supposition that the gospel is not true. These institutions, beside other excellent purposes which they serve, will continue to bear testimony to the truth of our religion, to the end of the world.

IF it be said, that the apostles might have invented what they record of these institutions, as well as other particulars of the history; I shall only answer at present, (for their veracity will be considered hereafter) that two simple rites, which can afford no gratification to avarice, ambition, or sensuality, and whose chief end is to promote humility, piety, and purity of heart, could hardly

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hardly have been the contrivance of men, who had determined, as those who reject their testimony must believe, to live and die impostors and hypocrites. For the institution of these rites is a matter in which they could not have been imposed on. They could not have fancied, that they had received a commission to baptize the nations, if they had received no such commission: they could not have believed that they were present at the celebration of the first supper, if they had not been present.

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BUT are not those parts of the Roman story, above alluded to, more probable in themselves, than the gospel history? Are not the former agreeable

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to the common course of human affairs : and is not the latter a recital of events, whereof many are extraordinary, and unlike any thing we have ever seen? Permit me to ask in return, whether, if mankind were told, and prevailed on to believe, that a revelation of the Divine will was to be made from heaven, it would not be natural for them to expect something extraordinary? Would they not have reason to say, ‘ God’s thoughts are not
‘ our thoughts, neither are our ways
‘ his ways? As the heavens are higher
‘ than the earth, so are his ways higher
‘ than our ways, and his thoughts than
‘ our thoughts. This revelation, being a supernatural thing, will probably, nay must certainly, be attended
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‘ed with supernatural circumstances.’
In fact, the gospel history, considered as the account of a divine revelation, is not less probable, than the Roman story considered as a narrative of the works of men. From what we know of the weakness wickedness and other peculiarities of the human character, we admit the probability of what is recorded concerning Annibal and Cesar: and from what we know, with equal certainty, of the wisdom power and goodness of God, we admit the probability of the sacred history. To our bodily eyes the Divine Essence and the human soul are equally invisible: the nature of both we discover in their works; from which it is not more evident, that man is wicked and weak,
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than that God is wise, almighty, and good.

HAD there been nothing extraordinary in the life and doctrine of Jesus, it would have supplied an argument of no little weight against his divine mission. This man, it might have been objected, gives out, that he is sent of God, that he speaks by inspiration, and that his works are the works of divine power. And yet he does and says nothing but what an ordinary man might say and do ; nor has any thing ever happened to him beyond the common occurrences of life. Why then should we believe, that either his wisdom or his power is superiour to that of other men? To this objection, had
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it been founded in fact, it would not, I apprehend, have been easy to frame an answer. The supernatural events, therefore, recorded in the gospel, unless they could be proved to be either unworthy of God, or impossible in themselves, (which no person will ever affirm who knows what they are), will be found to add to its credibility; and that in the same proportion nearly, in which supernatural events, related of an ordinary man, would take away from the credit of the historian who should relate them.

THE probability, that the gospel may be true, is also inferred from the utter improbability that it should be false. It is, as will be more particularly remarked

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marked in the sequel, like nothing of human contrivance. The perfection of its morality transcends the best efforts of human wisdom : the character of its Founder is far superiour to that of a mere man : and it will not be said, that his apostles can be compared to any other fishermen, or any other teachers, that ever were heard of. The views, displayed in the gospel, of the divine dispensations with respect to the human race, are such as, before the commencement of our Saviour's ministry, had never entered into the mind of man. To believe all this to be a mere human fable, requires a degree of credulity, which in the ordinary affairs of life would do a man little credit : it is like believing, that a first-

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rate ship of war might have been the work and the invention of a child.

HAD the apostles intended an imposture, there would not have been so many of them. Of twelve persons employed in promulgating a fable, and wandering with that purpose into different parts of the earth, it is not to be expected that, in defiance of persecution and death, all would to the end persevere in the same declaration. But all the apostles did persevere. One indeed was a traitor :—and what became of him ? At a time, when from man he had every thing to hope, and nothing to fear ; his master being condemned, his former associates dispersed and terrified, and himself patronised

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ised by the Jewish rulers ; this traitor was seized with remorse, confessed that he had betrayed innocent blood, returned the wages of iniquity to those from whom he had received it, and in despair ‘ departed, and went and hanged himself.’ All this is natural and probable, on the supposition that the gospel is true ; on the contrary supposition, it is incredible and impossible.

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SECTION II.

THE SUBJECT CONTINUED.

Of the argument from prophecy.

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THE gospel history is, in many particulars, an accomplishment of certain prophecies, preserved as sacred by the Jews themselves, and committed to writing several hundred years before our Saviour was born.

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That prophecy is possible, must be admitted by all who admit the possibility of other miracles, that is, by all who acknowledge the power and omniscience of the Deity. And that, in former times, and previously to the last and great manifestation of divine truth, prophecy and other miracles might have been expedient or necessary, though now they are so no longer, it would be very presumptuous to deny.

IN the history of the Old Testament it appears, that, from the earliest ages, an expectation had prevailed, among the Jews and their forefathers, that an extraordinary person, called by some of the prophets the MESSIAH, that is,
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the ANOINTED, or the CHRIST, would at one time or other appear on earth, and bring about a very important change in the condition of the Jews, and of all other nations. The antient prophecies that seem to relate to this Person, when taken separately, may to a superficial view appear to have less significancy, than Christians ascribe to them. But he, who compares them together, and observes, how they refer to, and illustrate, and often imitate the language, and sometimes copy the words of, one another, will be struck with their consistency and connection; and astonished to find so many of them, notwithstanding the variety and apparent incongruity of the circumstances foretold, so exactly fulfilled in the history

tory of the birth, life, death, and religion, of Jesus of Nazareth.

Soon after the fall, it was foretold, of this Great Person *, that he should be in a peculiar sense the son of a woman ; that from the malignity of the devil he should be a sufferer, but that he should bring destruction on that evil spirit. Two thousand years after, it was foretold to Abraham, that this person should be of the posterity of Isaac, and a blessing to all nations ; and it was afterwards predicted, that he should be of the tribe of Judah and family of David, and be born of a virgin in the town of Bethlehem. It was foretold, by the patriarch Israel, that,

* Genesis III. 15. Gerard's Sermons, 4. 5. 6.

that, till he should come, the Jewish government would not be subverted; and by the prophet Daniel the exact time of his death is foretold, as Mr Ferguson has proved in the most satisfactory manner. It was foretold, that this Messiah, this triumphant prince and Saviour, should die a violent death, as a malefactor, not for any sin of his own, but for the sins of mankind; and that soon after his death the city and temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed: but, notwithstanding this ignominious death, it was foretold, that his dominion should be over all nations, and without end, that he should speak peace to the heathen, and introduce a new dispensation of things, tending to,
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and terminating in, peace and happiness eternal.

It was foretold, that he should preach good tidings to the poor, and perform many miracles for the alleviation of human infirmity ; particularly, that he should give sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, hearing to the deaf, and the perfect use of their limbs to the lame. It was foretold, that he should be sold for thirty pieces of silver, and that with this money a potter's field should be bought ; that he should be scourged, buffeted, and spit upon ; that he should be meek and silent before his accusers ; that his hands and feet should be pierced, but that his bones should not be broken ; that gall

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and vinegar should be offered him to drink ; that lots should be cast for his garments ; that he should be buried in a rich man's sepulchre ; and that he should rise again without seeing corruption. How far these predictions were verified in Jesus, no person needs be informed who has read the New Testament. And in him alone they were verified, and in no other man that ever appeared on the earth.

BUT are all these predictions applied with equal plainness by the prophets to the Messiah ? They are not : some are more explicit and positive, others only insinuated. And if we had no other evidence of the truth of our religion, I grant that this would be defective.

ive. But, when we take a general view of the Old and New Testaments, and observe, that the one is, as it were, a completion of the other; and that the revelations recorded in both, though consisting of many parts, and delivered by different authors, and in different ages, have the same tendency, and the most perfect unity of design:—when we reflect, that these prophecies would mean nothing if they were not fulfilled in Jesus, but that, as fulfilled in him, they have a most important meaning; and that the prophets, who uttered them, predicted several other things that have come to pass, particularly concerning Tyre and Egypt, Cyrus and Babylon, and the state of the Jews after their dispersion by the Romans:—and, which

which is still more to the present purpose, when we find our Saviour and his apostles, whose veracity and supernatural knowledge we can prove *by other evidence*, appealing to these prophecies, and thereby justifying their doctrine and conduct, and thereby often silencing and converting Jews, who had studied the prophets, and acknowledged their authenticity :—in a word, when we join this to the other proofs of our religion, we become sensible, that the argument from prophecy has a force in it, which cannot fail to make a strong impression on every candid and considerate mind. But let not the adversary triumph, though to him this argument should not appear satisfactory : for the truth of our religion might

might be proved, though we were to omit this part of the evidence. Yet this has its use, in confirming the faith of the inquisitive Christian : and this has been singularly useful, in the conversion of the modern infidel, as well as of the antient Jew. See Bishop Burnet's account of the death of the Earl of Rochester.

THE better sort of the antient philosophers admitted, that certain offices of goodwill were due to all men. But universal benevolence, or a desire to promote the virtue and happiness of all men, seems not to have been prevalent either among them, or among the Jews. Love to one's country is celebrated by the Greek and Roman writers as a sublime
virtue :

virtue: but it was such a love, as prompted men to nothing more, than to take care of the interests of their own community, with little or no concern for those of other nations. In this respect the Jews were as narrow-minded as any people could be: they despised and hated all other nations; although the morality of Moses and the prophets ought to have given them a more liberal way of thinking. Into the mind of a Jew, therefore, how could it enter, except by supernatural means, that the promised Prince and Messiah, from whom so many great things were expected in behalf of the Jewish nation, should also be a 'light to lighten the Gentiles;' and that the influence of his power and benignity,

nity, as the deliverer of mankind, should be universal and eternal? This magnificent idea is familiar to us, because we derive it from Holy Writ; but how remote it must have been from the minds of men unaided by revelation, may appear from this, that there is no trace of it in any pagan author;—except, perhaps, in the fourth eclogue of Virgil: and that poem is generally thought to have been composed from some fragments of antient prophecy, probably of Isaiah, which had come, we know not how, into the hands of the great Roman poet.

Of several other prophecies it would not be difficult to show, that, considering the opinions and temper of the
Jews,

Jews, they are wholly unaccountable, unless we suppose them to have been the dictates of inspiration. Such is that memorable one of Zechariah, afterwards literally fulfilled in all its parts: ‘ Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy king cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass.’ Was this likely to happen? Was it thus, that kings and conquerors used to enter their capital cities? Was it with this humble equipage that the Jews expected their glorious and triumphant Messiah would appear? Yet thus he did appear; infinitely more triumph-

triumphant and glorious, than if he had been what they expected.

BEFORE I leave the subject of prophecy, let me subjoin a remark, which is perhaps too early introduced, but which, when the veracity of the apostles shall have been evinced from other topics, will be found to have great weight in the argument. It is, that there are also, in the New Testament, predictions, which have been plainly accomplished. Such is our Lord's prophecy, that he should be betrayed, delivered to the Gentiles, insulted, and crucified, and should rise from the dead on the third day : events, which fell out accordingly ; but of which, at the time he foretold them, one seemed to

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be impossible, and the others very improbable. And such is that, which he so particularly delivered concerning Peter's momentary apostasy; a circumstance which, considering the zeal, the generosity, and the intrepidity of that apostle, was most unlikely, and which Peter himself, notwithstanding his veneration for his master, did not believe to be possible, till he found it had happened. I may add, that Peter's exemplary penitence, and subsequent conduct, when viewed in a connection with the peculiarity of his character, form a striking proof, that his faith was equally well-founded and sincere, and that he 'knew in whom he believed.'

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THOSE other predictions, that have been supposed to allude to the church of Rome, or to the Mahometan imposture, I do not touch upon ; because the world has not yet perhaps seen their completion. But that of the destruction of Jerusalem must not be overlooked ; as it was so soon and in so signal a manner verified ; and as it related to an event, which, when our Saviour foretold it, the Jews being then at peace with the Romans, and apparently reconciled to their yoke, no human wisdom could have foreseen. So great is the resemblance between this prophecy and the calamities that followed, as these are recorded by Flavius Josephus, who had the best opportunities of information, being himself

self present at the siege ;—so like, I say, is the prediction to the event, that one would not be surpris'd, if the infidel were to suspect, that the event must have been prior to the prediction. But it is somewhat remarkable, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who have recorded this prophecy, died before the destruction of Jerusalem, and that John, who survived it, has not recorded the prophecy.

I SHALL first set down some parts of this prophecy, introduced with a prediction of Daniel ; and secondly, I shall quote some passages from Josephus, and one sentence from Tacitus, relating to the events whereby those
pre-

predictions seem plainly to have been accomplished.

‘ AFTER threescore and two weeks,’
says Daniel, ‘ Messiah shall be cut off,
‘ —and the people of the prince that
‘ shall come shall destroy the city and
‘ the sanctuary ; and the end thereof
‘ shall be with a flood, and unto the
‘ end of the war desolations are deter-
‘ mined.’

‘ SEEST thou these great buildings,’
says our Saviour, speaking of the tem-
ple? ‘ There shall not be left one stone
‘ upon another, that shall not be
‘ thrown down.—The days shall come
‘ upon thee, (O Jerusalem) when thine
‘ enemies shall cast a trench about
‘ thee,

‘ thee, and keep thee in on every side,
‘ and shall lay thee even with the
‘ ground, and shall not leave thee one
‘ stone upon another.—And great
‘ earthquakes shall be in divers places,
‘ and famines and pestilences and fearful
‘ fights ; and great signs shall there
‘ be from heaven.—There shall be
‘ great tribulation, such as never happened
‘ from the beginning of the
‘ world to this time.—They shall fall
‘ by the edge of the sword, and shall
‘ be led away captive into all nations :
‘ and Jerusalem shall be trodden down
‘ of the Gentiles.—This generation
‘ shall not pass, till all these things be
‘ fulfilled.’

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THE reader may compare this prophecy with the following extracts; the fifth of which is from Tacitus, the rest from Josephus.

1. 'TITUS commanded his soldiers
'to dig up the foundations of both the
'city and the temple.'

2. 'VESPASIAN's army compassed
'the city round about with a wall of
'thirty-nine furlongs, having on it
'thirteen towers, and kept them in on
'every side; and so made it impossible
'for the Jews within the city to es-
'cape.'

3. 'TITUS having commanded his
'soldiers to dig up the city, this was
'so

‘ so completely done, by levelling the
‘ whole compass of it, except three
‘ towers, that they who came to see it
‘ were persuaded it could never be
‘ built again.’

4. ‘ IN the times of Claudius and
‘ Nero, (a few years before the de-
struction of Jerufalem), ‘ there happen-
‘ ed in Judea a prodigious tempest,
‘ and vehement winds with rain, and
‘ dreadful lightning and thunder, and
‘ roarings of the trembling earth.’

5. ‘ ARMIES seemed to encounter,
‘ and weapons to glitter, in the sky ;
‘ the temple seemed to blaze with fire
‘ issuing from the clouds ; and a voice
‘ more than human was heard, declar-
‘ ing

‘ing that the deities were quitting the
‘place, which was attended with the
‘found of a great motion, as of per-
‘sons going away.

6. ‘THE great gate of the temple,
(which twenty men could scarcely shut,
and which was secured by bolts and
bars,) ‘was seen to open of its own
‘accord: a sword appeared hanging
‘over the city: a comet was seen point-
‘ing down upon it for a whole year
‘together. Before the sun went down,
‘there appeared armies in battle-array,
‘and chariots compassing the country,
‘and investing the cities: a thing so
‘strange, that it would pass for a fable,
‘were there not men living to attest
‘it.

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‘ NEVER

7. 'NEVER was any nation more wick-
' ed, nor ever did a city suffer as they
' did.—All the miseries that mankind
' had suffered from the beginning of
' the world were not to be compared
' with those that the Jewish nation did
' then suffer. The number of captives
' was ninety-seven thousand. Titus
' sent many to Egypt, and most of
' them he dispersed into the Roman
' provinces *.'

IN Jerusalem, during the siege, there
perished by famine, disease, and the
sword, six hundred thousand, accord-
ing to Suetonius; eleven hundred
thousand,

* See Whitby, quoted by West, in his Ob-
servations on the history and evidences of the
resurrection of Jesus Christ; p. 380. edit. 5.

thousand, according to Josephus and Jornandes. And not long after, a general persecution of the Jews took place throughout the Roman empire.—All these things came to pass within the space of forty years after the death of our Saviour; so that the generation, which was on earth when he uttered this memorable prophecy, had not passed away, when it was in all its parts accomplished.

THIS extraordinary revolution has had consequences not less extraordinary. Ever since the period I speak of, the Jews have been dispersed through all nations, without obtaining a regular establishment in any; have been generally despised wherever they went; have

have been without a king, without a prince, and without a sacrifice : and yet have not lost their religion, nor been incorporated with the gentiles among whom they wander ; but still remain a distinct people. Has such been the fate of any other nation ? Could this, then, have been foreseen or foretold, except by supernatural means ? Yet of them this was foretold by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Moses. Indeed the whole history of this people, before their dispersion by Titus and since, bears irrefragable testimony to the truth of both the Old Testament and the New. See Addison's remarks on it, in the four hundred and ninety-fifth paper of the *Spectator*.

Spectator *.—So much for prophecy. The argument arising from the excellency, and singular nature, of the Christian doctrine, will be considered by and by.

SECTION III.

THE SUBJECT CONTINUED.

The faith of the first disciples was the effect, not of weakness, but of well-grounded conviction.

THE historical part of the New Testament was written by men, who were eye-witnesses of many of the facts, they

* See also Butler's Analogy, part II. chap. 7.

they relate, and had the rest from the authentick information of eye-witnesses. Those men either DID NOT BELIEVE what they wrote, OR DID BELIEVE it.

I. If they did not believe what they wrote, they were impostors, and wanted to deceive the world. Now men never form a plan of that nature, unless with a view to gain some end; that is, to obtain some good real or imaginary. For it is inconceivable, that a rational being should give himself the trouble to invent an imposture, and support it through life; a work of great difficulty, and, in a case like that before us, of the greatest danger; in order to draw down mischief upon himself: and it is not more probable, that

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that he should do all this by chance, and without any purpose or intention whatever. When Pfalmanaazar forged his fable of the island Formosa, can we imagine that he had no meaning in it, or that by so doing he intended to hurt his own interest? Is it not more likely, that he hoped to make his fortune by it? What then was the motive, that could induce the apostles to deceive mankind? what fortune did they hope to make? what good, real or imaginary, could they have in view, if they were conscious, that what they affirmed was falsehood?

CERTAIN it is, that, when their Lord left them, they could no longer expect to advance their temporal interest,

terest, by adhering to his cause. On the contrary, they were told from the first, and, after his death, they knew and believed, that persecution and martyrdom would be their lot in this world ; and, as their Jewish education must have taught them that God is just and holy, they, knowing themselves to be deceivers, could entertain no hope with respect to the next. And this must equally have been the state of their mind, whether with the Pharisees they believed a future life, or with the Sadducees denied it. Surely, the certain prospect of persecution here, with no hope of reward, or with the apprehension of punishment, hereafter, can never be the motive that tempts men to falsify. Present gain might tempt

tempt the covetous, present power the ambitious, or present pleasure the sensual; and a delusive hope of future pleasure or power might tempt the enthusiast. But, where none of these temptations existed; and, with respect to the apostles, it is certain, that none of them did or could exist; what was there in nature, or in the human imagination, that could induce them, in support of a lie, to encounter a life of pain and poverty, persecution and scorn! All the impostors that ever appeared on earth aimed at the acquisition of temporal advantages, of pleasure, wealth, or power: and indeed it is hard to conceive, what other motives could induce a rational being to become an impostor. And, with these

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lurements in their eye, we too often find that men can harden themselves, for a time at least, against the terrors of a life to come.

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WILL it be said, that the apostles intended, by an imposture, merely to distinguish themselves, and acquire fame? This could not be their intention. All their doctrines have a tendency to raise the mind above the present world, and make it superiour to every consideration of that sort. The love of fame is not that universal passion which Dr Young supposes it to be. They who have conversed with many people, of different conditions and characters, must have found, that the greater part of mankind have no
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idea of such a passion. Nor is the love of distinction so strong in any breast, as to make a man expose himself knowingly to perdition and infamy in order to obtain it. Let it be observed too, that the first apostles were men of mean condition, mean education, and mean employment, and most of them considerably advanced in years. In the minds of such men we never see the love of fame predominant; though in such minds we often see the love of a fair character prevail, which, however, most men know is not to be acquired by dishonesty and falsehood.

WHEN men resolve to set an imposture on foot, they must have some reason to expect success in it: because a detection

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detection is in all cases dangerous, and may in many be fatal. The jugler knows, that his audience are credulous, and more willing to wonder than to inquire : he knows too, that some of them are his confederates, and that far the greater number are ready to take his part against those, who by their impertinent curiosity or unbelief may be inclined to interrupt the entertainment. Pfallmanaazar was in no danger of detection ; his island being little known, and at a great distance. He contrived a probable tale ; and, to make it the more probable, he did what he knew nobody would suspect him of having done, because no one man had ever done so before,—he invented a new language. In fact, though at first
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some doubted, he was never detected ; his fable obtained credit for more than half a century ; and it was his own voluntary confession, the effect of sincere though late repentance, that let the world into the secret.

Now suppose a few illiterate fishermen to contrive a new religion, different from all others ; and endeavour to obtrude it on mankind, in opposition, to the temporal interests of their immediate rulers, and to all the prejudices, the passions, the power, the learning, the philosophy, and the eloquence, of an enlightened and inquisitive age ; what chance would they have to succeed in the imposture ! How is it possible, that they should entertain any
hope

hope of success at all! The thing is impossible. And therefore the apostles must have certainly known, that their religion was from heaven, and would be supported by supernatural means;—which actually happened to be the case. For on no other supposition can the extraordinary success of their ministry be accounted for.

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A DISPOSITION to falsify and deceive is a criminal passion, that never appears single or solitary in the mind. Other evil passions never fail to accompany this; for where the love of truth is not, virtue cannot be. But the apostles, after their conversion, were patterns of every virtue; of humility, patience, benevolence, piety, and

and the most amiable simplicity of manners : virtues, which never did, and never can, meet in the character of a deceiver. Lying makes a man infamous ; which it would not do, if the world did not know by the experience of all ages, that from him who is inclined to that practice no good is to be expected.—I may add, that the virtues above mentioned, exemplified as they uniformly were in all the apostles, must have been the effect, not so much of natural disposition, for the apostles were in other respects of different characters, as of that divine grace and truth, with which they were equally and uniformly enlightened.

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THE first preachers of the gospel taught men to subdue all irregular desires of pleasure wealth and power, and to suppress every tendency of the heart to pride vanity and vain glory. Had they themselves been actuated by such desires or tendencies, their conduct must have belied their doctrine. But no two things can be more consistent, than the doctrine and practice of the apostles: they taught what they practised, they practised what they taught; and through life, and at death, their whole behaviour was uniform.

By what they taught they could never hope to make themselves popular, either in the higher or in the lower ranks of life; for they flattered no human

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human vice, but absolutely prohibited all. Among the vulgar they met with no little opposition, from prejudice, want of sense, and brutal manners. From the learned, of their own or of other countries, they could expect no indulgence ; because the religion they introduced was in most things directly opposite to the spirit of pagan philosophy, as well as to the tenets and temper of the Jewish sectaries. And from the Roman emperors, who in those days might be called the sovereigns of the world, what but persecution could that man look for, who was to deny their deification, and refuse to pay them divine honours : a prerogative, whereof those proud potentates too well knew the value to

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permit it to be wrested from them with impunity; but which, however, was at last, though not with impunity, wrested from them, in consequence of the preaching of a few unlettered fishermen from Judea.

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THOUGH the apostles did not, as some enthusiasts have done, provoke persecution, but exerted on all proper occasions a becoming prudence, yet self-interest cannot be said to have determined their conduct in a single instance. On the contrary, nothing is more evident, from their history and writings, than that, after the commencement of their ministry, the business of their lives was, to promote the glory of God, and make men superiour both

both to the adversities and prosperities of this life, and happy in that which is to come. And this they did, not by recommending, like the Stoicks, an unnatural and impracticable insensibility, or a stern resolution to submit to that which cannot be resisted; but by teaching, that the evils incident to this state of trial are all intended, by the merciful father of mankind, as paternal admonitions, or as opportunities of calling forth and exercising those virtues, which are necessary to prepare us for the enjoyment of future reward.

AND let it not be forgotten, that they had been educated in the principles and prejudices of the Jews; a
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nation at that time universally despised, and, if we admit the testimony of their countryman Josephus, as wicked as any that ever was on the earth; in spite of the advantages they ought to have derived from Moses, and their other moralists and prophets. The virtue of the Roman people was not in those days exemplary. Yet, when we compare their manners, as they occasionally appear in the sacred history, with those of the Jews, how are we struck with the difference !

THE Romans are indeed pagans ; but they are not destitute of that good-nature and love of justice, which one expects to find in a civilized nation : the Jews are seldom seen in any other
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character than that of bloody barbarians. Pontius Pilate avowed our Lord's innocence, and showed an inclination to save his life; Gallio proconsul of Achaia acted with good sense and moderation, when Paul was brought before him *; Claudius Lysias, Festus, and Felix, in their treatment of the same apostle, were not unmercifully severe; and the centurion, whose prisoner he was in his voyage to Italy, was very much attached to him. But the Jewish priests, scribes, and elders, conspired to murder our Saviour without a trial, suborned persons to bear false witness against him, and bribed
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* See Disquisitions concerning the antiquities of the Christian church, chap. 1.

one of his followers to betray him; and the same assembly, or their successors in office, connived at a scheme, and of course concurred in it, for the affassination of Paul. In a word, it appears, that the greater part, and what we call the better sort, of the Jews of that age, when they had resolved on any measure, would not hesitate to employ any means, however unjust, cruel, or shameful, in the accomplishment of it. That a nation so utterly profligate should have at the same time produced twelve men of such exalted piety, generous benevolence, and morals so refined and so perfect, as Jesus Christ and his apostles, is almost as great a miracle, by the acknowledgment of Rousseau himself
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(who is not partial to the sacred writers), as any that stands on record. There must have been something extraordinary in the cause, that could in these circumstances produce characters so transcendently excellent.

OF our Lord's disciples, previously to their conversion, we know little; but this we know, that they became soon after preachers and patterns of righteousness. How is it possible that this should have been the effect of their engaging in an imposture? Can the continued practice of hypocrisy and lying improve and purify the heart? The age wherein they lived, being more enlightened than any that had gone before it, and beyond measure addicted
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to disputation and inquiry, was a most unfavourable period for the introduction of any public fraud. In all that part of the world the arms of Rome had established her policy, the exactness whereof is well known : and the Greek learning, universally studied by the Romans, was likely to be carried into every country that was subject to their power.

It deserves particular notice, that, till after the death of their master, the apostles were never cured of the national mistake, that the Messiah was to be a great temporal prince, and to make the Jews the most powerful people in the world. Accordingly we find, that, immediately after his crucifixion, they
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were greatly disconcerted, and at a loss what to think of him. ' We trusted, said ' they, that it had been he who should ' have redeemed Israel *.' At that time, it seems, the cross was a stumbling block to them, as well as to others. And no wonder ; considering the hopes they had formed, and the sad disappointment occasioned by an event, which, though he had plainly foretold it, they were so unwilling to believe, as to flatter themselves it could not happen. In this state of confusion and trouble, if they had entertained any suspicion of imposture, nay if they had not been certain that there was no imposture, might they not, with a very good grace,

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* See the last chapter of St Luke.

and is it not probable that they would, have returned to their business and their first religion, saying, This was not the man whom we believed him to be? And, as, for reasons already given, nothing could have been more agreeable to their rulers, than such a declaration from such persons, it must undoubtedly have promoted their temporal interest. But their adherence to their Lord, and his cause, in circumstances so very extraordinary, is a proof, that they knew they did right; and were thoroughly satisfied, that the supernatural knowledge, which they received about this time from himself, after his resurrection, and at the descent of the Holy Ghost, was really from heaven.

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THE reader will be pleased to bestow a second thought on this argument. Let us for a moment take for granted what is plainly absurd, and suppose it is possible, that the apostles, during the *life* of their master, might have been imposed on; that the miracles they saw him perform were not real but fictitious; that the divinity of his manners was assumed, and not genuine; and that the excellency of his doctrine, the authority that accompanied all his words, and the veneration which his presence inspired, were the effect of mere human eloquence and address: yet surely his *death*, if it had put an end to his being, would have at last opened their eyes, and satisfied them, that he was not what

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what he had declared himself to be. With this persuasion, which on the present supposition they must have had, they, in affirming that he was risen from the dead, and in continuing to teach what he had taught, must have known themselves to be impostors. What then could be their motive to persist in a lie? That which could be no motive at all: the certain prospect of persecution, and death, (for how could they imagine it would fare better with them, than it had fared with their Master!) without any advantage whatever to counterbalance those evils. And what would have been their motives to return to their Jewish profession, and acknowledge they had been imposed on? The strongest that can influence

influence human nature : first, that indignation, which would be natural in men, who had forsaken all to follow a person, whom they now found to have deluded them into a very dangerous snare ; secondly, the hope of advancing their interest, by doing that which, for reasons already given, must have gratified their rulers in the highest degree ; and, thirdly, the consciousness of having, as became honest men, performed a duty, which they owed to themselves, their religion, and their country. In fact, if they were endowed with any share of understanding or of spirit, nay if they were not both idiots and madmen, it is not possible to account for their conduct on any other supposition than this, that their
testimony

testimony is true. The man must be credulous indeed, as well as ignorant of human nature, who can hesitate to admit this conclusion;—unless he choose to reject the New Testament history altogether. And, if he do this, let him account for the existence of the Christian religion, if he can. And let him no more pretend, that credit is due to antient records.

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WHEN we compare the four gospels with one another, we see nothing like collusion in the authors, but we may see very plain evidence that there is no collusion. They do not all relate the same things, nor in exactly the same manner; nor does any one of their books seem intended as an apology

logy for any other, or as a comment upon it. In the style of each there are peculiarities, more observable indeed in the original Greek than in any translation ; but the same unaffected simplicity prevails through all. Their testimonies differ not in any thing material ; and yet they differ as much as is usually expected in witnesses, separately examined, and giving a candid account of what they had seen and heard. A perfect co-incidence, where testimonies consist of many particulars, would breed suspicion of a pre-concerted plan : a few slight variations, in matters of little moment, would in most cases impress a persuasion of the integrity of witnesses. If in this manner we judge of the veracity of one
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another, and if the common sense of mankind warrants the judgment, and their experience after long trial finds no flaw in it; why should we argue from different principles, in judging of the veracity of the evangelists?

LAYING all these things together; every person, who understands human nature, and has read the New Testament with care, and with that humility and teachableness, that form as it were the groundwork of Christian faith, must be satisfied, that the apostles were no impostors, but believed sincerely what they taught:—which, indeed, to a man of taste would appear, as observed already, from the simplicity and artless manner, in which they
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tell their story, deliver their doctrine, and record their own faults, mistakes, and follies.

II. THEY believed what they taught, and what they recorded. And if so, their faith must have been the effect, either of WEAKNESS, or of WELL-GROUNDED CONVICTION.

OF weakness it could not be the effect. Such of their doctrines as are level to human capacity appear to be agreeable to the purest truth, and the foundest morality. All the genius and learning of the heathen world; all the penetration of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Aristotle, had never been able to produce such a system of moral duty,

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and so rational an account of Providence and of man, as is to be found in the New Testament. Compared, indeed, to this, all other moral and theological wisdom

Loses discountenanced, and like folly shows.

Was the great apostle of the gentiles a weak man ; he who spoke and wrote with such energy and address, and whose eloquence made a Roman proconsul tremble ? Were those weak men, who taught a system of opinions, which even the sovereigns of the world, and some of the least cruel, the most learned, and the most politick of them too, thought it their interest to bear down and destroy, not with argument,
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in which it would appear they had no confidence, but with fire and sword? Were those weak men, who, in defiance of persecution, and in opposition to all the power, policy, and learning, of the Roman empire, brought in, though unarmed and defenceless, a new religion, which continues to this day; is gradually extending itself over the earth more and more; and by the still small voice of reason daily puts to silence, or confutes at least, its most cunning and most inveterate adversaries? Were those weak men, who taught that, which has given wisdom and happiness to millions of mankind, and has without violence introduced into the manners and policy of a great part of the world changes the most important

important and beneficial, and likely to be as durable as the world itself? Could those, in fine, be weak men, whom the most inquisitive and most enlightened minds that have been on earth since their time, whom Bacon and Grotius, whom Newton and Boyle, whom Hooker, Clarke, Butler, and Stillingfleet, whom Milton, Clarendon, Addison, Arbuthnot, and Lyttelton, have held in the highest veneration, as not only wise, but inspired? Either, then, let the infidel admit, that the publishers of Christianity were not weak men; or let him prove, that the great persons now mentioned were destitute of understanding, or at least in that respect inferiour to himself.

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IN the sciences it has often happened, that, from ignorance of nature, men of great abilities have been led into error, which accidental discovery, or more accurate observation, has enabled succeeding inquirers to rectify. But no modern discoveries invalidate in the smallest degree the proofs of our religion. There is nothing in the philosophy of evidence that corresponds to telescopes or microscopes, to electricity or magnetism. Men judge of that matter now, as they did formerly. Credible testimony and their senses they believed from the beginning, and they do so still. Nor has it yet been found out, that any miracle recorded in the Gospel is impossible to divine power, or any doctrine there taught unworthy of

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of divine wisdom. Every new discovery in the visible universe exalts, when rightly understood, our ideas of the goodness and greatness of the Creator, and ought, consequently, to cherish that love and fear of him, which the whole tenor of revelation commands us to cultivate. And every late improvement in criticism and the knowledge of antiquity is found, when applied to the sacred writings, to throw light upon them, and, by so doing, to confirm the history, and recommend the doctrine. The progress of science, therefore, whereby in so many other respects the opinions of the ancients have been confuted or rectified, seems to confirm what the apostles taught concerning the

the religion of Jesus, by proving its permanency and unalterable nature.

GRANTING then, that the modern infidel, profiting by the discoveries of latter times, may be better informed in the sciences than the primitive Christians were ; it will not follow that he, or that the acutest of our philosophers, can be a better judge of the leading evidences of Christianity. It is true, that in some things we are not so credulous, as the world must have been while philosophy and history were little known ; and that of course we are more scrupulous in the examination of some sorts of evidence. But, in regard to the miracles, whereof the apostles were eye-witnesses, which they
recorded

recorded in their writings, in the belief of which they lived and died, and most of which their enemies of that time did not deny, they were as little liable to be imposed on, as if each of them had possessed the learning of Grotius, with the penetration of Newton. For such was the nature of those miracles, that, to make an attentive spectator a competent judge of them, neither learning nor genius was necessary; nor any other talent or accomplishment, but a sound mind, an honest heart, and the right use of one's senses.

THEY saw men, whom they and all the country knew to have been blind from their birth, made to see in an instant,

instant, without the application of any instrument or medicine : they saw leprosy, palsy, and other obstinate diseases, removed in the same manner, by barely speaking a word : they saw the dead raised to life, yea raised even from the grave : they saw a man's ear cut off by the sword of Peter, and the wound immediately healed with a touch : they saw water converted into wine in the presence of many persons, who drank of it, and were satisfied that the transformation was real : they themselves were part of a multitude of five thousand, whose hunger was allayed by a few loaves and fishes, when more fragments were left than there had been food at first : they saw their Master walk on the surface of the sea ;

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and

and they were present, when at his command a storm was changed into a calm.

By the instantaneous operation of the same divine word, they frequently saw human bodies set free from the tyranny of demons : for that God, in order to manifest the supremacy of his Son over the powers of darkness, as well as over the visible universe, might, at that time, and in that country, permit evil spirits to molest mankind more than usual, will not be affirmed to be either impossible or improbable, by those who acknowledge the possibility of revelation. Or if we suppose the distemper to have been no other than madness, or than epilepsy, (which
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however the general tenor of the history will hardly permit us to suppose), the cure must still be allowed to be miraculous. For to remove these diseases by speaking a word, and to expel a demon, are equally beyond the reach of human power, and equally easy to that which is divine.

THE apostles heard their Master foretel several events, particularly his crucifixion and resurrection, and they saw that, as well as some of his other prophecies, accomplished. They saw him publickly crucified, pierced with a spear, and buried. They saw the prodigies that accompanied his last suffering ; at least they must have seen the preternatural darkness, and felt the earth-

earthquake ; and the rending of the veil of the temple they would not have mentioned, if they had not known, that it was so. Three days after, according to his prediction, they saw him alive again, conversed with him, ate and probably drank with him, felt his body to be a real material body, felt even the scars of his wounds, saw him frequently during the space of forty days ; and finally, were standing by him, and receiving his benediction, when in open day they saw him ascend towards heaven, following him with their eyes till a cloud received him out of their sight.

THESE are facts, in regard to which they could not be mistaken, though they

they had been the most credulous of mankind. But credulous they were not : some of them, on the contrary, seem to have been unreasonably sceptical. Indeed, if we allow them to have had common understanding, which no person who knows their story will deny, we must suppose, that they would not rashly, or without full conviction, engage in a cause, which in a temporal view was likely to cost them so dear. They were, it is true, unlettered men ; but the propriety of their conduct, the wisdom of their doctrine, and the success of their ministry, are so much the clearer proofs of their inspiration.

ONE of them, a man of learning and uncommon abilities, a zealous Jew, and an unrelenting persecutor of Christians, in the midst of his sanguinary career, while he 'verily thought with 'himself' that the cause he had engaged in was acceptable to God, and beneficial to his country ;—while, by adhering to it, he seemed to have every thing to hope that could gratify his ambition, and while, by revolting from it in the way he did, he had every temporal inconvenience to fear that can intimidate human nature :—this man, I say, while in these circumstances, and charged with a publick commission which he himself had solicited from the high priest, and at the head of a train of attendants,

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was, together with them, at noon day, struck to the earth by an extraordinary light from heaven; in consequence of which he became a Christian, declaring that he had been warned by a supernatural voice; renounced for ever all worldly pursuits, and cheerfully submitted to poverty, persecution, and death, for the religion of Jesus.

WHAT could be his motive? Was it a regard to duty, founded on his knowledge, and his love, of the truth? Then is his conduct easily accounted for; and his resignation to the many evils he had to suffer was the effect of that support, which pious men receive, from the approbation of their own
mind,

mind, the hope of future reward, and the enlivening influence of divine grace. From any other principle is it possible to account rationally for his conduct? Was it from lust of fame, the desire of pleasure or of power, or in order to better his fortune, that this man, with a mind elevated by genius, and enlightened by learning, chose to descend, with certain, imminent, and dreadful danger to himself, from a high and honourable station,—that he might become the associate of a few poor, despised, persecuted, and illiterate fishermen, among whom he never assumed any superiority, and whose master had lately been put to an ignominious death, as a malefactor, not only of the

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worst kind, but also of the meanest condition?

IN a word, Paul either was, or was not, an impostor. If he was an impostor, he must have been a very singular one indeed. For, instead of aiming at riches, honour, pleasure, or power, (and at one, or other, or all of these, all other impostors have aimed), his hopes and purposes must in every respect have had a contrary direction. He must have preferred contempt to honour, imprisonment to liberty, danger to security, and scourging, stoning, hunger, nakedness*, and martyrdom,

* 2 Cor. xi. 27. 1 Cor. iv. 11. 12. 13.

tyrdom, (for they were all before him, and he underwent them all without a murmur), to a life of ease and affluence. And, finally, being a strict Pharisee, and consequently believing a future state, he must, without any temporal allurements whatever, have preferred damnation to happiness in the world to come. But could he thus, in every sense of the word, prefer misery to its opposite? If he could, he was a madman:—which his writings and history prove he was not.

IF he was no impostor, he must have been an honest man : and, that being admitted, we must also admit what he testifies concerning the manner and consequences of his conversion; in other

ther words, we must believe the gospel to be true. And if he was the author of those epistles, which ever since they were written have born his name; and if he taught those doctrines, which the physician Luke his fellow traveller heard from his mouth, and has recorded, he must have been, no frantick or weak enthusiast, but a person of good understanding, of exemplary virtue, and of the highest attainments in true wisdom;—in that wisdom, I mean, ‘which is from above,’ and which tends to purify our nature, and make us happy, both now and for ever. The thirteenth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians would alone prove him to have been one of the best and wisest men that ever lived.

I SAID, that Paul, if he was not an impostor, must have been an honest man ; and, this being admitted, that the gospel must be true. If indeed it could be shown, that he was credulous, and that before his conversion he had entertained any partiality to the doctrines and character of Jesus, it might seem possible at least, though no doubt very improbable, that his passions and imagination might have disordered his judgment, and perverted his senses ; and, therefore, that the circumstances of his conversion, though believed by him to be real, might have been visionary. Well : was he a credulous man ? Or had he any partiality of this kind ?

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So far was he from being credulous, that all he had heard of our Lord's miracles (for he must have heard of them, and from eye-witnesses too,) had no weight with him ; and nothing could overcome his incredulity, but a miracle wrought upon himself :—wrought, not in darkness or in solitude, or at a time when any thing had happened to enfeeble or depress his mind, but at noon-day, in the publick highway, in the midst of his adherents, in the neighbourhood of a great town, and while he himself was employed, as he firmly believed, in the service of God, and of his country. And so far was he from entertaining any partiality to the Christian cause, that, till this miracle was wrought for his conversion, he
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looked upon Jesus as an impostor and blasphemer, and upon the disciples, as a set of men, whom it was in the highest degree meritorious to persecute and destroy.

IN some of his epistles, addressed to churches he had planted, we find him declaring, as a thing which they knew to be true, that he was endowed with the power of working miracles, and had actually wrought many. If the fact had been otherwise, would he have hazarded such a declaration, in writing to a people, among whom he knew he had personal opposers, and whom he was reproving for several irregularities *? And if the fact was so,—if he really

* See Butler's analogy, part 2. chap. 7.

really was a worker of miracles, as well as a preacher of the purest and sublimest morality, must we not consider him, as in a very peculiar manner, and in a very high degree, favoured by that Being, who is the giver of every good and of every perfect gift?—They, who believe in God, and candidly weigh all these circumstances, will not object to St Paul's veracity. And if that which he testifies concerning himself be true, it is absolutely impossible that the gospel can be false.

INDEED, the conversion of this great man, and his conduct both before and after he became an apostle, do alone amount to such a proof of our religion, as cannot be overthrown ;—in any other

other way, than by proving the *Acts of the Apostles*, and the subsequent *epistles*, to be fiction and forgery. The reader will find a full, an elegant, and, I think, an unanswerable illustration, of this argument, in Lord Lyttelton's *Remarks on the Conversion of St Paul*.

AND now, to conclude this part of the subject,—Let them, who are acquainted with the history of our Saviour, attend to it ever so slightly, and then say, what regard is due to the judgment of those, who talk of electricity and magnetism as principles in nature capable of exalting the man who understands them into a worker of miracles. Will magnetism or electricity, or any other natural principle
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that can be mentioned, enable the person who is skilled in it to raise himself or others from the dead ; to cure diseases by speaking a word ; to foretell future events ; to make a few loaves and fishes a sufficient meal for five thousand men ; to publish a system of morality more perfect than any other that ever was in the world ; to impart to other men the power of working miracles, and particularly, of speaking languages they had never learned ? We have heard of making the agitation of water subside by pouring oil on it : Plutarch mentions this as a well known fact, quotes Aristotle's reason for it, and gives another of his own * ; and

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* Plut. Nat. Quæst. 12.

of late it is said to have been proved by experiment ; but who will undertake to calm the sea by uttering a word !

THEY who compare the meekness and benevolence, the candour and modesty, the power and the dignity, of our Saviour, ith the craft, secrecy, and ostentation, of a jugler, (one trembles even to think of the comparison), and find no material difference between the mighty works of the one and the petty tricks of the other, are far beyond the reach of argument, and must, on this subject at least, be absolutely irrational. As well might they say, that the jugler, because he can shift a card, or manage an easy calculation, must have the command of nature,

ture, and the power of changing death into life. The clown, who should say so, would be laughed at for his credulity and ignorance. What then shall we think of the philosopher, who, in his judgment of our Saviour's miracles, shows himself equally ignorant and credulous?

LASTLY ; the apostles found themselves endowed, agreeably to their Lord's prediction, with the power of working such miracles as he had wrought. They saw the lame walk, the living drop down dead, and the dead arise to life, at their command. They felt themselves on a sudden enabled to speak a variety of languages they had never learned ; a talent which, in the
course

course of their ministry, they must have had frequent occasion to exercise. In this is it probable, is it possible, that they could be mistaken?

THEIR faith, therefore, was the effect, not of WEAKNESS, but of WELL-
GROUNDED CONVICTION. CON-
SEQUENTLY, THEIR TESTIMONY
IS TRUE.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.